



Although I suppose I take as much pleasure in watching fluffy white lambs gambolling in a field as the next person, I have always lived in towns and my contact with sheep is really very limited. In fact I can remember only one close encounter with a sheep, and it happened in this wise. One year in the mid-1960s my parents and I took our annual week's holiday at Ilfracombe, in north Devon. One lovely sunny day we decided to walk along the cliff-top path to Lee Bay, a couple of miles distant. My father was carrying a rucksack with some essential supplies, and we stopped in a small field overlooking the sea and sat down to enjoy some chocolate whilst admiring the sea view. Suddenly our attention was drawn to a noise behind us and, when we turned round a sheep had got its head in the rucksack and was rummaging round inside, amongst the cameras, plastic raincoats, sticking plasters and other things always so necessary to a day out in England in the summer.



It was a very nice sheep, woolly, but clean and tidy, and, when its head emerged from the bag, with a sweet expression. We expected it to back off when we stood up and turned towards it, but no, it advanced, appearing to want to be petted, and really one could do nothing else, so charming was it. Of course, it was all cupboard-love, and the animal had a taste for chocolate. I am not sure now, but it was probably Cadbury's Fruit and Nut, and the sheep had more than its share of what we had got with us. Seeing that there was no more food to come, at least not from us, it wandered off, out of sight, over the brow of the hill, and that was the last we saw of it, and we saw no other sheep at all that day, so I really don't know whence it came or whither it went. We presumed it had been hand-reared, and that was why it was so tame, trusting and entirely delightful.

That image probably bears little resemblance to the sheep in the flocks to which Jesus refers in today's gospel reading. I imagine they were much hardier and probably rather unkempt, and certainly would never have tasted chocolate!

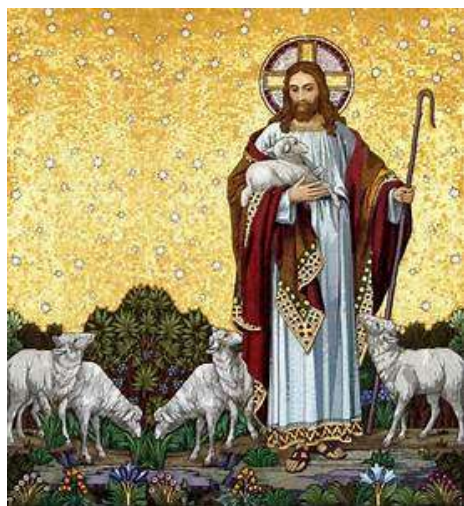
So much for the sheep. Thinking now about the shepherd, with which Our Lord identifies so closely in this story - although it is a familiar image to me, I realise that is entirely due to these bible stories themselves. I have never knowingly met a shepherd in real life, and if I think of an English shepherd my impression is coloured considerably by the biblical references.



If I do try, in my mind's eye, to set a shepherd in an English contemporary situation I probably picture someone accustomed to their own company, thinking deep thoughts whilst engaged on their lonely task and all rather noble, in an unassuming sort of way. But this surely is a result of seeing that person in relation to Jesus, the good shepherd? What image did the Pharisees have in their minds,

when Jesus was speaking to them, or what was the picture in Jesus' mind as he spoke? I have heard plenty of sermons about shepherds over the years, as, no doubt, you have, and I am trying to recall some of the things I have heard about shepherding in the first century to help me recapture the meaning and impact of what Jesus was claiming when he said, "I am the good shepherd". One thing I have learnt is that shepherds were not highly regarded generally at the time, and certainly not by the Jews. Shepherding was a lower order occupation anyway, generally they were hirelings, looking after someone-else's sheep, and, for the Jews, because shepherds generally kept to themselves, out of town, with their flocks, they were not able to participate fully in community religious life, which automatically made them outsiders, not wholly to be trusted. This is one of the things that makes S. Luke's telling of the Christmas story remarkable. What is the meaning of the angels appearing to a bunch of shepherds? – they are about the last class of person to whom anyone in their right minds would deliver momentous, earth shattering news. The Pharisees hearing Jesus' claim must surely have had some of this in mind.

But there was also another image that they, well versed in Jewish scripture as they were, must have come to them, that of the shepherd as the leader of the people. Again an English picture of a shepherd going with his flock before him, with the help of a dog to keep the sheep in order, is unhelpful. In their society, the shepherd did indeed go in front of the flock, and lead them to new pasture, so the use of the image of the shepherd as a leader was entirely natural. In the book of Ezekiel, chapter 34, we find the prophecy against the 'shepherds of Israel' who spend their time gathering to themselves the good things in life and have done nothing to provide for the sheep, the people, and have left them to be scattered and to become prey for wild animals. In the prophecy, the Lord God is enraged by the faithlessness of the shepherds and determines to demand the sheep back from the shepherd's 'care', vowing to seek out those that are lost and to provide for all the sheep himself, and to set over them one shepherd, his servant David, who will lead them properly, and provide for them.



So when Jesus makes his claim to be the good shepherd he is tapping into this pre-existing prophecy and shewing himself, in succession to David, the hero leader of the Jewish people, as the one to lead God's people into good things. But he makes a more extensive claim. In the Ezekiel prophecy the existing shepherds are just self-interested, and neglect the sheep, in contrast with whom David will be the decent shepherd who will exert himself on the behalf of the sheep. Jesus, however, goes further and says he will lay down his life for the sheep – he will not just provide for the sheep nor turn the other way and let the wolves devour the sheep, but he will interpose himself between the wolves and the sheep, prepared himself to die in defending them.

This must have been quite a startling claim for the Pharisees to hear. Even if Jesus was using figurative language, he seemed to be saying that he would be a better, truer shepherd of God's people even than the great King David had been, and if his language was not intended figuratively I doubt his first hearers could quite have grasped what he meant. Jesus goes on to extend the claim further by talking about other sheep from other folds, all of whom he will gather into his one flock. This is something else the leaders of God's chosen people would not want to hear. Not surprisingly this saying (and others) gave rise to much argument, with some calling it a sign that he was raving and possessed, but there were some who saw there might be something of truth in Jesus' words.

*Next illustration is The Good Shepherd, by Duncan Grant, the altarpiece mural in the S. Blaise Chapel in Lincoln Cathedral, 1954*



Unlike the Pharisees, we hear these words of Jesus from the advantageous position of looking back over the first Easter and the first Good Friday and see in his crucifixion the fulfilment of the pledge Jesus made to lay down his life for the sheep. We can see, therefore, how this claim of Jesus to be the Good Shepherd was a true figure of what was to come and it is an image to encourage faith in him. But it is a particularly illuminating image, with the central character not some all-conquering military hero, but a humble man going to the furthest extremity to fulfil his vocation. As an image of God it would be blasphemous if it were not true and it stands as an

example of how, in our ordinary lives we might contribute to the bringing in of God's kingdom by each self-forgetful act of generosity and of self-giving love.

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